



The Truth Is Absolutely Relative

Through Attentive Observation to Transcendence of the Self

Cover image: *Scheidung Abends*, Paul Klee, 1922 (part of, rotated a quarter turn)

Other books —

De Kracht van Aandacht – Kleine Gids voor het Trainen van Je Geest (2013)

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For all who devoted their lives to realizing the nature of mind. Without their longing for liberation, their courage, perseverance, and wisdom, the authentic Spiritual Path would have remained impassable.

The Supreme Insight

This immediate awareness (rigpa), radiant and without any substance,
is the supreme insight.

This all-pervading freedom from reference point and concepts,
is the supreme meditation.

This uncontrived abiding, free of deliberation and attachments,
is the supreme activity.

This original and spontaneous presence, which need not be sought,
is the supreme attainment.

— Shabkar (1781–1851)

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Introduction



From personal development to spiritual liberation

In our organized society, arriving at a desired destination is almost inevitable. For physical destinations we rely on our memory if we have been there before, a map or GPS app if we do not know the way, or we take transport that, once we have boarded, drops us off more or less at the door.

How different it is to set out on your journey toward personal development and spiritual liberation. To begin with, the destination itself can be hard to determine — it is, after all, a virtual destination — and the route toward it is not unambiguous. The ambiguity arises because it is a dynamic interplay between ourselves and our experiences. This means, certainly on the stretch toward spiritual liberation, that the goal may change as we change our route: by changing teacher, traveling companions, or guiding philosophy.

This fluidity makes our journey exhilarating, but sometimes confusing as well, while stagnation, in whatever form, occurs regularly. Sometimes it is

necessary to change route or destination in order to do justice to the insights and experiences you have gained. But, as in other areas of life — such as work, relationships, family — our tendency toward attachment means we cannot easily free ourselves from routes and company that no longer fit. In my life, my first great change took shape when, at 22, I decided to break off my sculpture training at the art academy and go to India, to the teacher Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh. The *I Ching*, a Chinese oracle book popular at the time, which I consulted for advice, indicated that ‘crossing the great water,’ the ocean, would be a good thing. And in hindsight it was — a choice that gave my whole life a different direction and content.

I have now been working for over 40 years as a (gestalt) therapist, trainer, and author, and I never resumed my sculpture training after returning. I have never regretted it — though I would note that guilt and regret are two concepts (and experiences) that, in my view, stem from a lack of clarity about one’s own motives and underlying beliefs. Fortunately, I have proved rather unreceptive to these limiting feelings, and ever since that formative experience in India I have tried to apply *taking responsibility* as my guiding principle.

The concept of ‘personal growth’ covers a wide spectrum of possible meanings. What it must contain in any case, I believe, is the insight that it is an ongoing process. In the theory of the psychologist Abraham Maslow (1908–1970), the realization of individual capacities through ‘personal growth’ plays, as one of the first, a major role. He assumed in all human beings a tendency to want to realize their unique potential in their lives. Maslow defines this process with his famous term *self-actualization* as: ‘the desire to become more and more what one is: to become everything that one is capable of becoming.’

Later he added to his classic hierarchy of needs (Maslow’s pyramid, p. 170) the highest level of ‘self-transcendence,’ the capacity to transcend one’s own self. The terms ‘self-actualization’ and ‘self-transcendence’ effectively mark the path from personal development to spiritual liberation. Interestingly, what is at stake here is the realization of capacities and states already present within us. The condition, however, is that we have met the earlier basic needs before we can turn to the realization of the ‘higher’ needs.

According to Maslow, the degree to which people manage to meet their needs in a stable way determines their level of development. This approach

to development as the unfolding of capacities already present resonates in various traditions and with various thinkers. William James, a pioneer in psychology, regarded human development as a process in which potential unfolds through interaction with our experiences and choices — a more dynamic perspective but with the same essence: freeing what is already present within us.

In the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, too, we find an intriguing formulation of what personal growth and spiritual liberation can be: “The riddle which man must solve, he can only solve in Being, in being what he is and not something else, in the immutable.” Striking in these perspectives are the paradoxes they contain of ‘doing’ versus ‘not-doing’ (being), and of ‘change’ versus ‘the immutable.’ This apparent contradiction underlies many of the dilemmas the personal grower encounters on the way to spiritual liberation.

Doing and not-doing

At first glance it seems that when you do, you are not, and when you are, you do not(hing). Personal growth, in Maslow’s terms, means realizing through Doing that which (already) is. Nietzsche seems rather to suggest that through Being we naturally come to that ‘Doing’ we came here for: solving the riddle. Development is neither purely active nor passive, but more like a dance between purposeful practice and allowing natural unfolding to take place ‘of itself.’

It is a subtle process in which the conscious removal of obstacles plays a central role. This book is about the various aspects, theoretical and practical, of personal development toward spiritual liberation. That development can be summed up briefly and aptly as — from doing to not-doing. It offers you a deepening view of what this adage means in practice. After all, a theory or perspective without practical application has very limited value in your life.

From working on, to transcending, the self

The essence of personal growth lies in developing our ‘self,’ our potential capacities. Further along the way toward spiritual liberation, the essence shifts to fully including and then transcending that very self, by activating our capacity for transformation. Ken Wilber (1949) uses a handy example to clarify the distinction between apparent and actual transformation: development is pictured as a skyscraper — development here means going from

one floor (stage of development) to the next, higher floor (stage of development).

Translation

Wilber calls apparent development *translation*: here you make changes on the same floor in terms of furnishing, the arrangement of objects, and colors. Translation is a form of ‘window dressing’ that suggests transformation but is not — you remain, after all, on the same floor, with the same perspective. We see this phenomenon frequently in New Age movements: the suggestion of, but no real, transformation.

Transformation

This is actually arriving — through the process of including and transcending — at a higher and more spacious perspective. From a higher floor you have an essentially different perspective, with deeper and more essential insight. Transformation through including *and* transcending — the *how* of consciousness development — demands far more attention, courage, and perseverance than translation.

It is the practice of transcending the self — that self you have called ‘I’ your whole life. At the same time, real transformation is not without risk: in the process of including and transcending, obstacles will present themselves, and upon arrival you have as yet no experiential knowledge on that floor, with that perspective.

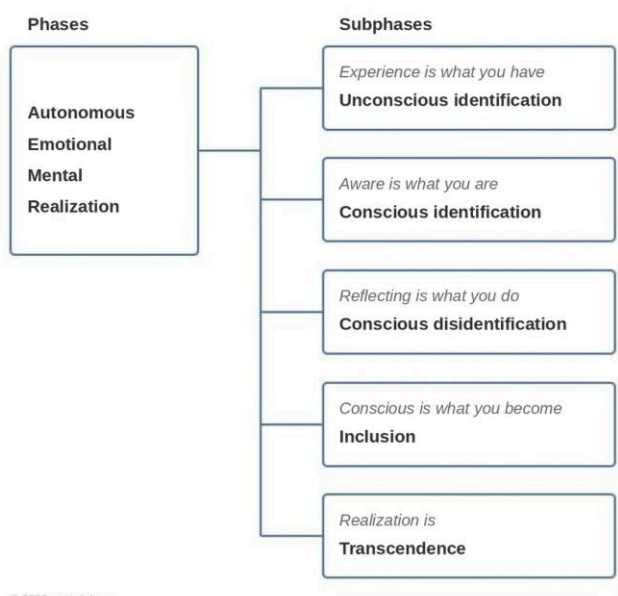
The themes

This book invites you to a deepening inquiry that begins with Perception — how we perceive and interpret reality — and takes you through crucial areas of human development. Via the cultivation of Attention and Awareness and Training Your Mind, we come to the practice of Meditation as a transformative discipline. The theme of the Spiritual Path deepens your understanding of what spiritual development entails, while the themes of Relationships and Reactivity show how this development manifests in our interactions with others.

The theme of Consciousness Development offers a structured framework for mapping your own development. The later chapters on Meaning, Leadership, Wisdom, and Truth complete the circle, as we return to the fundamental question: How can we realize our unique potential while at the same time transcending the boundaries of the self?

Consciousness Development

Our potential Consciousness Development consists of an ongoing process of consciously including a content and then consciously transcending it. In this process I distinguish 4 Phases (chronological) — the *Autonomous*, *Emotional*, *Mental*, and *Realization* Phase — and 5 subphases per Phase.



This developmental model forms a common thread throughout the book, even where it is not explicitly mentioned. Each section of the book highlights aspects that are relevant at different phases of development — from fundamental perceptual skills to the highest wisdom.

The paradox of ‘doing’ and ‘being,’ of active development and passive unfolding, finds its resolution in the insight that the truth is absolutely relative — always dependent on the level of consciousness from which we regard it. What appears a contradiction at one level becomes a complementary unity at a higher level.

In that sense, this book is both a practical guide and an invitation to transformation — a journey from personal development to spiritual liberation, in which you are both the traveler and the destination.

The book is structured so that you can read it in one go, but better still in parts — and *do* it. Do, because a number of texts carry applications within them, and every theme concludes with one or more Integration Exercises. I strongly advise you to do the exercises above all, because insights may inspire enthusiasm, but in themselves they bring no change in behavior.

With thanks to Brigitte Hermans for her corrections and suggestions for clear wording and consistent writing.

Have a good heart, Ramo de Boer.

Utrecht, February 2026



Perception



Introduction to Perception

What we perceive is a perception, not the truth

Marcus Aurelius

This statement resembles the title of this book, *The Truth Is Absolutely Relative*. Pausing to consider perception and investigating how it works is crucial if we truly want to develop further and ultimately free ourselves from hope and fear. Looking back on my own development, perception — how it comes about and how I can influence it — has been the common thread in my curiosity and growth from the very beginning. Even as a child I noticed that what I perceived was not the same as what my parents, my sister, and others perceived. In retrospect, I can see that even then I was already rudimentarily aware that I could observe myself.

After all, perception is not only our sensory perception of our immediate surroundings (outside); it is also our sensory perception of ourselves (inside). And not just bodily sensations such as pleasant, unpleasant, or painful, but also feelings and emotions, and images and thoughts (above). In

fact, everything we can perceive. Together this constitutes our experience and our perception. Perception is the occasion for meaning and meaning-making. Problems arise because we easily confuse our perception with what we think is the truth.

This happens because our experience arises from our sensory perception. The interpretation of that perception itself (what we make of it) is so fast and automated that we do not perceive it. What we think of our surroundings and of ourselves we do not see as a personal perspective, but as the truth. It is, after all, what we perceive — so that is how it is!

Here lies the essence of the work of a lifetime: through our identification and fusion with our perception — physical, emotional, and mental — we are too close to it. Literally and figuratively, we lack overview and therefore miss the direct insight that perception is not the same as truth. What is needed is to make our perceiving more conscious, so that we can, as it were, see through the foreground and gain more sight of the background.

These texts on perception approach perceiving and perception from different points of view and in different ways. Central is the investigation of the *phenomenon* of perception: how it comes about, and how you can influence it through more conscious observation and intervention. It is a good starting point for this book, because all the themes that follow also arise from, and are interconnected with, our (conscious) perception.

The aim is to observe more consciously so that, from there, we can broaden and adjust our perception as we choose. In other words, you examine the *emotional/mental algorithms* that have arisen in you for their purpose and their results, and you make adjustments of your own choosing. An important form of freedom — one that, paradoxically, always requires limitation as well.

But more on that later in the book.



Perception – I See, I See What You Don’t See!?

As children we often used to play the game ‘I see, I see what you don’t see!’ You had to guess what the other person saw, based on vague hints about what they could see and you (as yet) could not. You won if you managed to keep the hints so vague or misleading that the other person could not guess it and gave up. Or the other person won if they did manage to guess the object. The game was exclusively about the so-called objective properties of what was observed and did not concern itself at all with the psychology of our perception. That, however, is something we quickly (have to) learn as we grow up.

For what I see is not always — indeed very often not — what you ‘see.’ We may agree on the visual externals of the object — I see what you also see — but we will differ in the meaning we give to, or our interpretation of, what we see. Perception, however simple it may seem at first glance, is a rather complicated process in which both our senses and our mind are inextrica-

bly involved. An old and interesting piece of wisdom about our biased perception is this one from *Mullah Nasrudin* (1208–1284), the famous sage of the Islamic Sufi tradition.

The Key in the Dark ¹

Mullah Nasrudin was crawling on his hands and knees, right under the street lamp. Hardly a fitting posture for a man of faith, and at two o'clock in the morning at that. Drinking is forbidden, but if you do it anyway, then surely not so openly. It raises questions. 'Mullah, what are you doing there?' The mullah was looking for the key to his front door. Now, people thought the mullah an odd fellow, but he was popular, so before long half the village was crawling on the ground with him, searching for his house key. Two o'clock became three o'clock, three o'clock became half past three.

Haste and hurry did not yet live in Nasrudin's village, so everyone kept searching diligently. But nothing is inexhaustible, and eventually even the villagers' patience came to an end. After they had combed the entire area around the lamp for the umpteenth time and turned every pebble over twenty times, they had had enough. 'Are you sure you lost it here?' 'No,' said Nasrudin, 'I lost it closer to home, but it's so dark there. Here in the light, searching is easier...'

Perceiving and perception

Perceiving and perception are an essential part of our life. In fact, it *is* our life; our consciousness *is* perceiving (what it is beyond that, we still do not really know, despite all our technical and scientific progress). These two concepts are sometimes treated as identical and sometimes explained as different. For this inquiry I use the following definition:

'Perceiving, also called perception, is the process of acquiring, registering, interpreting, selecting, and organizing sensory information.'

Interestingly, perception has both a *technical* and a *philosophical* side:

- *how does the process take place in which an external stimulus produces an internal image?*

¹**Mullah Nasrudin**, The Key in the Dark. Compiled by Wim van der Zwan, Altamira — Brecht 2000

- *how* is our worldview connected to our perception — in other words, how is knowledge produced?

To put both in perspective, we take a brief look back at history — noting, for the sake of accuracy, that my view and my choices here are of course only one of the possible ways of looking at it!

Philosophy of science ²

One way of looking at history that matters for our subject is a perspective from the *philosophy of science*, and in particular the transition from the Christian-Aristotelian worldview to the worldview of the natural sciences. The Christian-Aristotelian worldview stayed close to the everyday perception and experience of reality — call it our ‘common sense.’ In this medieval perspective, the universe has a number of characteristics:

1. The firmament revolves around the earth;
2. The sun rises and sets;
3. Only in the superlunary realm (the heavens) does one find eternal regularity; here in the sublunary realm, decay, corruption, and chaos reign;
4. The universe is a round, finite dome;
5. Everything that moves eventually comes to rest again, unless a force is added to it. The only exceptions are the eternal, circular movements of the celestial dome and the planets;
6. Colors, smells, sounds, and tactile sensory experiences have a real, physical existence;
7. The entire cosmos, the planetary system, the earth, the plant and animal kingdoms all have their place, function, and value. They exist in the service of humankind. Not only does the earth stand at the center of the cosmos (geocentrism), but so does the human being (anthropocentrism).

This medieval view of motion and rest is abandoned with a new approach by Galileo and Newton, both of whom dissolve the split between the two spheres by means of mathematical constructions: they want to understand both spheres in the same way — *as above, so below*.

²**Philosophy of science** is a discipline within philosophy concerned with the critical examination of the presuppositions, methods, and results of the sciences. In addition to the natural sciences, it also counts, for example, the social sciences, psychology, and economics among its fields of study. My favorite branch of philosophy!

Objective and subjective

Characteristic of these pioneers of the scientific revolution is that they did not believe their own eyes! Through the mathematical tradition of Pythagoras, among other influences, Galileo arrives at a mechanistic philosophy in which the real world is equated with the physical world. Here he arrives at a dichotomy: subjective and objective properties of reality.

- *Subjective*: these consist of experiences, sensory perceptions bound to the *perceiving subject* — color, smell, taste, sound, and tactile properties (in the Middle Ages still regarded as physical realities)
- *Objective*: properties attributed to physical objects (size, shape, motion, and rest)

Descartes develops this further, partly through his investigation of the demarcation between objective and subjective phenomena: he holds that sensory sensations — such as smell, color, and sound — correspond to configurations in the physical world, and are therefore objective properties (as with Galileo), while the perception of them, for Descartes too, belongs to the subjective properties.

Among the subjective properties Descartes also places states of consciousness and activities such as remembering, thinking, willing, and imagining. He calls the objective and subjective properties of reality physical and psychical respectively. Descartes believes that the nature of the relationship between body and soul is beyond the reach of philosophy and arrives at his dualistic philosophy: the human being is a composite of two completely independent substances, body and soul. This makes a causal connection between the two impossible. He therefore had no choice but to conclude “I think, therefore I am” — otherwise there would be no one there! ³

Problems

Philosophical and scientific problems arise here from a natural-scientific worldview with no place for the human mind: attention is devoted exclusively to objective phenomena, while subjective phenomena are ignored.

³**René Descartes** arrived at his famous “*Cogito ergo sum*” (I think, therefore I am) through **methodical doubt**. In his “*Meditations on First Philosophy*” (1641) he systematically doubted everything he could doubt — his senses, the external world, even mathematical truths. But he realized that one thing was beyond doubt: the fact that he *doubted* meant that he must exist as a doubting/thinking being.

The problem here is that:

- science itself is based on the *contact* between subject and object (world);
- the human being is body *and* mind — perceptions, experiences, *and* a physical object.

In short, both are *relational*, while no relationship is assumed. The birth of psychology as an independent field of inquiry comes about because Descartes designates the mental — that is, consciousness — as a separate field of study. Two schools of thought then emerge.

Rationalist and Empiricist psychology

Since the scientific revolution, philosophers have tried to answer the question of the justification of knowledge by appealing to the validity of a source of knowledge. Once a source is accepted as valid, all that remains is to demonstrate its correct use. As a rule, two sources of (scientific) knowledge are distinguished:

1. **experience** — the sensory perception of the empirical world > *empiricism*
2. **reason** — the principles of rationality > *rationalism*

The differences between the empiricist and the rationalist approach also affected the psychological mechanism each of them assumed: *how* is knowledge psychologically ‘produced’ by the human mind?

Empiricism

- assumes that the mind is gradually filled with sensory information
- this accumulation yields knowledge about the environment
- these experiences are the building blocks for general insights, which come about through associations between the building blocks.

The central problem here is that the empiricists were never able to answer satisfactorily *how* sensory experiences are converted into concepts (how do warmth and light become fire?)

Rationalism

- assumes that the mind by nature already possesses certain capacities, such as reasoning and imagining.

The problem for the rationalists is that it remains unclear what the connection is between sensory experiences and these innate capacities. After all, they can only establish the existence of these capacities on the basis of the very same facts that prompted them to assume their existence in the first place (a circular argument).

Reflection experiment

We have seen that the old psychological schools of empiricism and rationalism had trouble explaining the ‘production’ of knowledge. How do you see it? What is knowledge, and how do you think you ‘produce’ knowledge — from perception, from reason, from both, or otherwise? Try to argue it out for yourself.

Gestalt psychology – a view of perception

Gestalt is a scientific school in psychology which holds that things are primarily perceived as wholes (gestalts), and not as the sum of elements connected by association. Legend has it that Gestalt psychology was born two years after the psychologist Max Wertheimer’s interest was sparked, during a train journey in 1910, by the optical ‘behavior’ of the telegraph poles and cables along the track.

When you look from a moving train at the succession of telegraph poles and wires, you do not simply see individual poles gliding past one by one. Instead, you experience a fluid, continuous movement — as if the poles and cables themselves were moving or making ‘waves.’ This is an illusion of movement between discrete, static objects. This phenomenon was problematic for the Associationist school, because they explained perception as a sum of individual sensations — elementary building blocks joined together through association. But what Wertheimer saw was that the *experience of movement* could not be reduced to the sum of the perceptions of individual poles. The movement arises in the perceptual organization itself.

Over the following two years Wertheimer conducted research and came up with a hypothesis about that by which the organism managed to translate individual, successive impressions into a unified perception of constant movement (the *Phi* factor). Although Wertheimer established here *what* happened, there was as yet no answer to *how* it happened. Around the notion that — unlike with the associationists — the subject (the organism, the perceiver) played a more complex role in this process, a new psychological school arose.

The Berlin School

Wertheimer, Köhler, and Koffka were part of it, and their research focused mainly on perception — with the aim of proving that form is more than the sum of its components. Their conclusions demonstrated that perception is structured according to certain regularities — these are summarized in the so-called ‘*gestalt laws*.’

They explain why a person’s subjectivity, in interplay with simple environmental stimuli, determines perception. According to gestalt theory, the gestalt laws organize perception and make possible the separation between ‘figure’ and ‘ground’ (foreground and background) in the environment. The gestalt laws of grouping also apply to areas of sensory perception other than the visual.

Example

In the perception of music, an instrument or the singer’s voice is often perceived as figure while the music continues in the background. Which form becomes figure or ground at any given moment is governed by the person’s independent organizing principles (subjectivity). Thus certain preferences and current life themes, but also a number of impediments such as blindness and hearing disorders, determine the nature of human perception.

The Gestalt principle

This principle is a psychological theory which holds that the human mind sees a whole before it sees the individual parts. It is based on the idea that “the whole is more than the sum of its parts” (Aristotle). This means that we often see a whole image or idea, even when it is made up of different parts.

Applying the Law of Prägnanz

The Law of Prägnanz applies to various aspects of perception, including visual perception, auditory perception, and cognitive processes.

- **Visual perception:** When we look at a complex image, we tend to see it as a whole rather than concentrating on the individual parts. For example, we see a face rather than separate eyes, a nose, and a mouth.
- **Auditory perception:** When we listen to music, we hear a melody rather than separate notes.

- **Cognitive processes:** When we solve a problem, we often try to gain a general understanding or overview before concentrating on the details.

Prägnanz is a Gestalt principle that describes how the human brain unconsciously simplifies complex information into the simplest, most recognizable patterns. It is also known as the ‘law of simplicity’ or ‘law of good gestalt’ and holds that we interpret visual elements in their most logical and complete form. This principle explains why, for example, we see the Olympic rings as five separate circles rather than as a series of complex, overlapping lines.

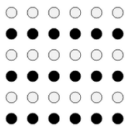
- **Basic principle:** People tend to see patterns that are regular, uniform, and orderly, because this requires less cognitive effort.
- **Simplification:** Complex or ambiguous visual input is reduced by the brain to a simplified, coherent form in order to process and remember the information.
- **Application:** This principle is widely used in graphic design, user experience (UX) design, and branding to ensure that logos, icons, and websites are immediately recognizable and comprehensible.
- **Translation:** The German word ‘Prägnanz’ means approximately ‘concise,’ ‘forceful,’ and ‘meaningful.’

Gestalt laws

The law of Prägnanz is central to gestalt-theoretical research and holds that we tend (unconsciously) to *organize our experience in a way that is regular, symmetrical, simple, and meaningful*. It is assumed that the result of a perception is stable and therefore lasting, to the extent that the stimulus conditions of the environment allow.

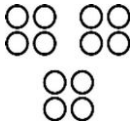
Classic examples of the grouping laws of perception are:

The law of similarity



When a number of things are perceived at the same time, there is a tendency to bring the same or similar things together into groups that are as homogeneous as possible.

Law of proximity



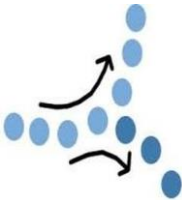
The tendency to see things that are close(r) together as a group, and no longer as separate things.

Law of common fate



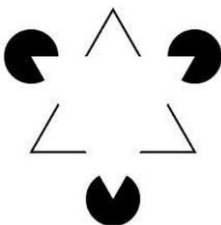
The division into groups is preserved as much as possible through change, so that the groups retain their form even when the individual parts of the group are moving.

Law of continuity



The law of continuity holds that elements of objects tend to be grouped, and therefore integrated into perceptual wholes, when they are aligned within an object. When objects intersect, people tend to perceive the two objects as two single uninterrupted entities.

Law of closure



When a pattern can have either an open or a closed course, the closed course is preferred. We tend to ignore interruptions and complete the figure, in order to create familiar images and forms.

Wholes

Wertheimer argued that it is not the case that the *receiving* organism (that is, we) takes in the constituent stimuli separately, but rather *whole* configurations (gestalts). When the whole (figure) is interrupted or incomplete, the subject (that is, we) tends nevertheless to see the whole, or to take action to fill in the missing parts. If that fails, we will experience a measurable tension and frustration.

The fundamental problem the early gestalt theorists tackled was thus precisely that question of the organizing principle: *how* do we give meaning to the experiential field so that what we see and know forms a coherent whole, and not an (over)flood of stimuli? Think also of the nowadays frequently used ‘diagnosis’ that we are overstimulated — in other words, unable to make a coherent, meaningful, and purposeful whole of it all!

Their answer was that the fundamental, relevant unit of perception is a significant, meaningful whole. Organization — an organized figure — is the elementary building block of perception, and of the subject’s response to the perceptual stimulus. What remains unclear at this point is whether these organized wholes are present in nature, or in the perceiving organism. The research of Wertheimer and his colleagues ultimately did not reach the level of the ‘hard’ sciences. This is partly due to the tautological nature — a circular argument in which nothing is proven — of many of the laws they formulated. As an example, we take the law of *Prägnanz*.

Good gestalt

We saw above that the *concept of Prägnanz* assumes that the *result* of a perception is *stable* and therefore lasting, to the extent that the stimulus conditions of the *environment* allow. To this is added that these configurations are “as good as circumstances permit” (‘good gestalt’). This gave rise to the idea that the quality of the gestalt is measurable — but unfortunately that turned out to be an illusion.

The dependent variable (‘good gestalt’), which according to the law varies in relation to the independent variable (prevailing circumstances), could only

be defined in terms of those very circumstances, and vice versa. In hindsight it seems obvious that the missing element in the prevailing circumstances is precisely the interest, need, or motivation of the subject — of the one who perceives!

Kurt Lewin – development of field theory

Lewin's great contribution was to bring the gestalt model out of the laboratory and into the far more complex everyday life. It was precisely the limitation of laboratory research with animals that was largely responsible for the missing element: the organization of the field by the organism — the perceiver — *itself*. The difference lies in our entering, or moving through, an already given, existing field ourselves. We must then use our perception of the field to engage with that field. In doing so, we will simultaneously try to achieve certain desired goals and to avoid bad outcomes.

The need organizes the field

This proposition of Lewin's states that —

‘everything in the field is seen by the organism as important or not, from the standpoint of his or her own needs, depending on its perceived status as a potential help or obstacle in the satisfaction of those needs.’

Lewin arrived at this proposition on the basis of his experiences and observations in the First World War — he argued that a soldier on the battlefield will see what he needs (to see) at that moment. In gestalt theory, the ‘field’ is the dynamic interaction between an individual and his or her environment, consisting of the total situation at a given moment. This field is a complex network of relationships and interactions in which the human being and their environment are inextricably connected and mutually influence one another. It ultimately comes down to this: perception is not ‘receiving’ at all, but an active process — in which we ourselves are the meaning-giving factor. From there — and herein also lies the phenomenological ⁴ aspect of the gestalt view — we can state that there is no *absolute objective truth or reality*, but only a great diversity of *subjective perceptions*.

The aim of Gestalt therapy can accordingly be described as — *discovering*

⁴**Phenomenology** comes from the Greek *phainomai*, meaning to appear. Edmund Husserl, the founder of philosophical phenomenology, seeks the ‘foundation for a well-grounded philosophy in the phenomena, in reality as it appears and presents itself to consciousness.’

the many aspects of our perceptual possibilities in order, from there, to arrive at a more adequate perception of the total relational situation.

The paradox in formulating laws and principles — of perception, or as below of a field theory — is that they in turn influence our perception!

Key principles of Gestalt field theory⁵

1. People cannot be understood in isolation, but only as an integral and interactive part of their socio-cultural background and physical environment.
2. The field consists of all the interactive phenomena of individuals and their environment, and all aspects of that field are potentially influential and interconnected.
3. Human behavior cannot be attributed to a single cause but arises from the interlocking forces of the field — or as a function of the organization or constellation of the field as a whole.
4. The field and the forces operating within it are constantly in motion. Individuals continually change their perception of the field as they organize and understand it differently, from moment to moment.
5. People actively organize and reorganize their perception of their circumstances (or field) by constantly making certain aspects of the field into figure (foreground), whereby others become (back)ground, and vice versa — the need or interest organizes the field.
6. In doing so, people give individual meaning to the events they experience.
7. In this way they contribute to the creation of their own circumstances or lived experiences (they co-create the field) and bear existential responsibility for their own lives, or at least for the meaning they give to their lives.
8. Human behavior and experience take place in the present, and a person's behavior can only be explained in terms of the current field.
9. If all aspects of the field are interconnected, then a change in any part of the field is likely to affect the whole field.

⁵*Developing Gestalt Counseling*, Jennifer Mackewn

Conclusion

If we see the principles of gestalt field theory as a whole, rather than each principle separately, a perception of reality emerges that is above all practical. This pragmatism does justice to the phenomenology to which gestalt psychology is indebted, and to the conclusion that, on the basis of these principles, there can be no absolute truth. Does this somewhat answer the question of how knowledge arises? Yes, somewhat — because the development and qualitative improvement of our worldview is evident. What needs far more attention, in my view, is insight into how individual perceptions become a group, cultural, or national perception, and vice versa.

The question remains to what extent we can gain sight of individual — and group — perception at all. Perception, as we saw above, is a dynamic result of the interplay with the environment. From the expression of a perspective in our behavior, something can indeed be inferred about the active perspective of an individual or group, but that does not offer sufficient insight into the essence of the interaction with the environment. For that, we will have to make contact with the individual or group itself, in order, through dialogue, to shape that essence into a gestalt — a meaningful whole.



Truth



Introduction to Truth

In nondualistic approaches such as Dzogchen in Tibetan Buddhism, or Advaita Vedanta, a practical distinction is made between the relative and the absolute.

Reality is what is — independent of what we think about it, thus absolute — while truth is what we say or experience to be so, thus relative. If we pause to consider this, it seems that reality is absolute, and truth relative. After all, reality is as it is, and truth is a perception of reality. We often confuse these two — we take the relative reality as we perceive it to be absolute truth.

Think, for example, of people who say ‘I feel it, I experience it, so it is true.’ They take their experience and perception as absolute. Being unconsciously identified with relative reality and relative truth, as we usually are, is the ground of our suffering.

At this last theme of the book we also come back to the first theme: perception, now of the relative and the absolute.

What is striking is that with both relatives there is a distinction between a subject and an object (dualistic), while with the absolutes subject and object coincide and dissolve (nondualistic). We can see absolute reality as the ground on which relative reality becomes figure. Absolute truth is absolute reality knowing itself. Not two things that resemble each other, but one 'being' seen from two directions:

- From being: absolute reality
- From knowing: absolute truth

From my own experience (perspective, thus relative) I see that both directions — knowing and being — are needed for a stable realization of the nature of our mind. Everyone has, in their life, had glimpses of clarity in which the nondualistic reality is present — beyond the relative, beyond concepts, beyond words — it is pure being, pure perception, pure consciousness.

But for lack of knowledge and context it often goes unrecognized for what it is. The subject (I) coincides with the object — put differently, the perceiver and the perceived are One, the phenomenological consciousness that always perceives something has now become perception itself, One, and not Two (subject and object).

I have read this many times, and written about it myself, but the direct experience of being, which I have noted many times (you see that words immediately create problems, because 'who or what noted that, then?' suggests a subject and object) does not let itself be captured in words.

The relative and absolute are also called conceptual reality and non-conceptual reality. That which can be captured and expressed in concepts — all images, words, and names are concepts — is by definition relative, because meaning depends on context and perspective. Non-conceptual reality can only be experienced directly, and put into words in poems and imagery, as a relative representation of the One.

The many images, rituals, prayers, and religious books we have created through the centuries are the form we, in our relative reality, give to the absolute. It is meant, in principle, to help us to still directly experience what we easily overlook. That directness is problematic for many religions and faiths, because if we ourselves can arrive at the direct experience of the One, the Divine, no institutional religions and beliefs are needed anymore.

The relative shaping of the Absolute, the One, should unambiguously point and lead us toward our own capacity, as an inseparable part of that One, to directly experience our own divinity, or Buddhahood. If it instead enslaves us, or distracts, or hinders us for someone else's gain (religion, church, guru), then that is not Truth.

The Truth Is Absolutely Relative because it cannot be proven, but can be directly experienced. You can, I can, we all can, if we have the good fortune to find the right Path to Liberation.

Find and walk your Path to the unmistakable experience of the One.



The Truth Is Absolutely Relative

Absolute and relative are concepts we encounter in various spiritual traditions. Unfortunately they seem, at first sight, simpler than they are in essence. In nondualistic traditions, such as Tibetan, Zen, and Chan Buddhism, and Advaita Vedanta, a distinction is made between absolute and relative reality, or absolute and relative truth.

They are the conceptual foundation for the given that spiritual development and liberation are possible at all — that is, the transcending unification of the two perspectives (with the caveat that the absolute is absolutely no longer seen as a perspective, but as that which IS). One of the most stubborn elements of spiritual development is, for most of us — for me, in any case — arriving at a good understanding, and being able to apply this wisdom.

Philip Renard⁵¹ describes it as follows:

⁵¹*Non-dualisme*, Philip Renard, Uitgeverij Felix, 2005.

‘At the first level [the absolute — unity, non-separateness] everything is simply what it is, without any relation or possibility of comparison with anything else. Thought can do nothing more here; nothing more can be divided up. At the second level [the relative, multiplicity, and possible separateness] everything depends on all kinds of factors, including the gaze that is cast upon it.’

However self-evident it may seem that we simply perceive ‘how it really is,’ that turns out, unfortunately, not to be our daily reality. There is a noticeable distinction between residing in our relative, reactive reality and being in our original state, which is free of any attachment, aversion, or indifference in our actual experience.

The absolute as yardstick

A fairly consistent phenomenon is our difficulty reconciling both realities, or truths, with each other. We quickly fall into projecting absolute truths such as perfection, completeness, and omnipresence onto our relative reality (or, more difficult still, that of others!). This is where the wisdom and transformative potential of the teachings get lost, and even become counterproductive. As Philip Renard notes, at the absolute level there is nothing for (regular, more or less logical, left-brain) thinking to do.

This means that the absolute truths named above — of course a paradox, still wanting to capture the non-conceptual absolute in concepts — are a formulation of the (relative) ideal of the absolute state. As soon as these absolutes are applied in our relative reality, problems immediately arise. In our relative reality, measuring is knowing; in the absolute, however, there is no measurer, no knower, no measuring instrument, nor anything to measure or compare.

Measuring leads to relative knowledge, not to absolute knowing

The projection of the assumed absolute truth ‘perfection,’ for example, is in itself enough to rank everything that seemingly isn’t perfect as relative. Here arises the vicious circle of a high standard — one that becomes our reality only upon full realization (relative and absolute becoming one, nondual) — that we, in our relative perception, can by definition never meet.

After all, it consists of comparing within duality: good–bad, friend–enemy, but also realized versus unrealized. Measuring, ranking, judging, valuing are

activities of the mind identified with the relative, ego world. And they do indeed have their place and function in that world.

Beyond the struggle

The impulse to write about this was my own struggle — and one I have observed and that is recognizable in many others — between the need or necessity to judge what seem like reprehensible matters in myself and others, and the wish to be able to look at these relative matters without judgment and with compassion. I know that struggle; it presents itself, after all, every day, from small daily occurrences to the great suffering I see passing by in the News every day. We can also describe the essence of practice on the Path as integrating the two realities. Or, as it is also put: in the world, but not of the world.

The true realization, again and again, that there is no distinction whatsoever between them becomes possible through our total alert presence in the here-and-now. In this state of being, both realities are one, nondual, simultaneously existing, encompassing and transcending each other. They taste the same — ‘One Taste,’ as the Tibetan Buddhists also call this ultimate state.

Application in the relative

If I look at the situation without attachment — for example to my judgment about someone else’s actions or opinions, my presumed rightness and superiority (at least I don’t do what he does!) — or aversion, to a lack of reliability, transparency, and sincerity — then I can calmly judge and stand by my relative perception, without needing to identify with it:

I have an opinion, and am not it. I have a perception, and am not it. I have a judgment, and am not it, I have feelings, and am not them, I have thoughts and am not them.

In this way I can relate to an often compelling relative reality of adversity, pain, and suffering without falling into the noncommittal platitudes that rear their head whenever I confuse the absolute and relative once again. The absolute, the one, is always there, simultaneously with and in its manifestation as the relative.

The truth is absolutely relative

‘Truth’ is undeniably a concept, and thus belongs, by definition, to relative reality. The good thing about this is that, absolutely seen, no one can claim to hold the truth — but that does not mean we do not often unknowingly try to do exactly that.

We must be willing to let go of the false certainty of declaring our personal perspective to be absolute truth. And practice the liberating humility that our perspective is no more, and no less, than that. At the same time we must stand for it — it is, after all, how we embody the absolute in the relative world at that moment, whatever we may think of it. Then, through the unification of the two perspectives within us, the inner duality/polarity will dissolve. And One Taste will be our stable realization.

The Experience of a Single Taste⁵²

Should your mind cling
to a real but deceptive object,
the mind can be deceived by it.

Yet object and mind have the same taste —
like the moon and its reflection —
though they may seem to be two,
that is, if you truly know it.

Should an old man’s eye stray
to a body of young flesh,
this can bring the corpse of his lust back to life.

When attachment to the body is released into all-encompassing openness,
youth and old age take on the same taste.

Do you perceive the three stages of birth and rebirth as of no consequence,
then the pain of death will indeed prove severe.

But in the essence of original awareness,
birth and death have the same taste.

⁵²*Songs of Spiritual Experience.*

Is the bond of love with family and friends strong,
then being separated will bring much tension.

But do you know the nature of samsara,
then being together and parting have the same taste.

Do you expect too much of the gods,
then be wary of the work of the devil.

But do you regard the world as a god,
then god and devil have the same taste.

Do you carry a train of thought too far,
then hundreds of urgent matters occur to you.

But do you glimpse the non-conceptual mind,
then you can sleep like a corpse, without acting.

Do you listen to everything people say,
then you are paralyzed: you can do nothing more.

But do you take your own fate into your hands,
then you can immediately turn your mind inward.

In the eyes of others your qualities are greater,
but when you know your own faults
there is no room for self-deception.

It is time to bury the pernicious corpse!



Integration Exercises

The poem ‘The Experience of a Single Taste’ above is written in the Tibetan tradition, with much imagery and metaphor. It is a form of *mengak*, a practice instruction.

- Read the text ‘The Truth Is Absolutely Relative’ once more, including the poem. Contemplate on the meaning of the whole poem.
- Rewrite the poem in your own words, in the sense that you re-render it so that it becomes unambiguous insights and instructions.
- Determine for yourself the essence of this instruction and write it down in your own text or poem. Print it out and use it for contemplation and meditation.

The Truth Is Absolutely Relative

The complete book is available in softcover, hardcover
and e-book from Amazon and Ingram.